edexcel

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2015

Pearson Edexcel GCE in Music Technology (6MT03) Paper 1

Edexcel and BTEC Qualifications

Edexcel and BTEC qualifications are awarded by Pearson, the UK's largest awarding body. We provide a wide range of qualifications including academic, vocational, occupational and specific programmes for employers. For further information visit our qualifications websites at www.edexcel.com or www.btec.co.uk. Alternatively, you can get in touch with us using the details on our contact us page at www.edexcel.com/contactus.

Pearson: helping people progress, everywhere

Pearson aspires to be the world's leading learning company. Our aim is to help everyone progress in their lives through education. We believe in every kind of learning, for all kinds of people, wherever they are in the world. We've been involved in education for over 150 years, and by working across 70 countries, in 100 languages, we have built an international reputation for our commitment to high standards and raising achievement through innovation in education. Find out more about how we can help you and your students at: www.pearson.com/uk

Summer 2015
Publications Code US042232
All the material in this publication is copyright
© Pearson Education Ltd 2015

Principals' Report

The quality of teaching and support given to students is evident in most of the tasks, particularly in recording 3B, where support can involve advice on quality of performances, mic choice and placement and room treatment and exactly how to apply effects.

Task 3A Integrated Sequence

Next to Me was the most popular choice, about 80% of entries chose this over Ready For the Floor.

The standard was generally felt by examiners to show a slight improvement in the weaker submissions, but no noticeable improvement at the high end. This was borne out by an increase in the mean mark, but no increase to the A grade boundary. Most work was in the competent or good holistics.

As with previous years, it is fairly common to see a number of similar problems with all but the very best work. This includes errors or omissions in parts such as backing vocals and supporting harmony parts: in Next To Me massed BVs were often omitted or incorrect, bass octaves often ignored, strings and brass missing higher or lower parts, piano parts inaccurate, tambourine having wrong rhythm or not appearing in correct places in song, errors in drum patterns; in Ready for The Floor BVs were also often omitted or incorrect, sometimes the rhythmic vamp synth was quite inaccurate, the bass parts often incorrect (combination of sub bass playing octaves and brighter synth bass playing offbeat doubles), inaccurate kick drum and hi hat parts, and inaccurate guitar parts where sequenced.

Timbre was generally handled quite well, but if parts are missing they have to be assessed as incorrect timbres. Balance and Pan often had a few problems, though the wide panning of Next to Me was usually attempted. The balance of live parts and sequenced parts continues to present problems. Students will always benefit from spending a significant amount of time on focused listening using studio monitors during the mix stage, the impression is that this vital part of the work is not given enough emphasis.

The detailed shaping work required in dynamics and articulation & phrasing often displayed several misjudgements. Most students attempted the brass swells in Next to Me, and the swell synth in Ready for The Floor with fair success. Larger scale contrasts and builds/drops were less successful. Basic control of note lengths shows a lot of variation in capability; sometimes bass is legato when it should be more punctuated, piano notes which should be sustained in Next To Me was a common problem, and length of held notes in pads, strings, brass is often untidy. Velocity shaping is usually considered but not always successful. Hi Hats/Tambourine often could have been better. Slides and melisma is parts such as bass (Next to Me) and lead synth (Ready for the Floor) is often omitted or misjudged in all but the very best work.

Students who chose Ready for The Floor seemed to enjoy the challenges presented by the synthesis features in the production. Nearly all attempted the filtering changes and lengthening envelope on the Vamp synth, with some success. The vocal treatments were usually attempted in each piece, re-triggering in Ready for the Floor and Hey shouts in Next to Me. The panning of the Hey shouts was often misjudged, where attempted, students panning alternate shouts instead of slower movement from side to side actually in the original. There were sometimes timing issues with the re-triggering in Ready for the Floor but often this was done well. Effects were generally more successful in Ready for the Floor than Next to Me, where the long thick reverbs were only sometimes attempted and not successful where attempted. The drum and vocal production in Next to Me is one of the most challenging aspects of this piece and many candidates did not give it the attention it warranted. It seems students who chose Ready of the Floor understood the need to work on the sonic shaping of the production and made a better attempt at the general effects and synthesis.

Audio capture shows the same issues around vocal proximity or drifting on and off mic that often cause problems. Students in the role of engineer/producer need to ensure the capture of performance is consistent, including vocalist positioning, and re-take sections or the whole piece if necessary. Processing cannot compensate for these errors, so poor dynamic control or EQ often result.

Task 3B Multi-track Recording

Standards here were felt to be largely similar to previous years, perhaps with a small increase in the standard at the lower end like 3A.

Choice of material and management of performers continue to be a significant factor in the success of this piece of work, and it is also clear where centres have given students a comprehensive and detailed programme of instruction and practice in recording, processing and mixing.

Rock or Punk songs with the addition of a few percussion instruments rarely lead to successful outcomes. These instruments are hard to integrate into the ensemble, and are often not captured or processed well. Cajons have become popular in schools, but they are a busking instrument not a studio instrument. They do not lead to a successful outcomes when used to replace a drum kit in the heart of a production. Songs that have acoustic guitar and perhaps one or two percussion instruments often work well, as do songs featuring two or three piece horn sections. The more straightforward the ensemble the song is, the easier it will be to mix.

It is still surprising to see quite a high number of pieces that do not meet the requirements of the task in terms of track count, number of acoustic instruments used and number of microphones used. It is clearly explained on the portfolio document and any uncertainties can be resolved using ask the expert online service.

As in recent series, the capture is often handled well, though the vocal issues mentioned in relation to 3A also occur in this task. Many centres

have addressed issues around acoustic environments in recent years and made improvements to their recording spaces. It is still sometimes an issue with drum capture, and commonly with piano capture. Horn sections are often handled well, as are guitars recorded with amps and acoustic guitars. Strings are rarely successful when chosen.

Processing and balance & blend always present more issues than capture. This work cannot be completed in a hurry, and needs many hours of focused listening using studio monitors, and incremental improvements to reach the best outcomes. Headphones are not suitable for this work. Most students show evidence of using EQ, but often the overall frequency range is restricted or exaggerated in particular ranges. Vocals are often handled fairly well, though tend to be either dull or thin when problems occur. Drums often present more problems, as does bass.
Dynamics processing continues to be an area where good practice is uncommon. Over-compression continues to be common, including heavy mix bus compression. With some performances it would be more suitable to use level automation to even out dynamics where needed, for example with vocals where the delivery is uneven in places.
Effects use is often restricted to Reverb, and choice of type and amount on individual parts often displays inconsistencies. It is becoming rare to see swamped parts, but an effects field that is too dry is common. Other effects are rare, except for guitar effects pedals/amps and simulators. When keyboards are used, the preset reverb is often unsuitable but not changed before recording.
Balance and blend commonly display a few problems, though often these are not severe and could easily have been improved. Drums are often too quiet, except Hi Hats which are often too loud. It is becoming unusual to see massive issues here, more a combination of several small misjudgements.
Stereo field is usually attempted, though sometimes only by panning drum overheads. Very wide fields are quite common, which can leave a hollow centre if care is not taken.

Task 3C Composing Using Technology

Of the three briefs, *'City by the Sea'* (video) was the most popular with a large proportion of candidates choosing this. Next most popular was the *'Long Walk to Freedom'*, and *'Where Are You From?'* being attempted by only very few candidates.

Most centres now seem to understand the requirement to use original sound design as a compositional tool, and encourage students to explore methods of creating an original palette of timbres and developing these in the composition using creative mixing techniques. In the best submissions it is now common to see a wide range of techniques including synthesis with real time variations and changes; radical experimental effects use; sample and audio manipulation. In mid range submissions some of these techniques are usually attempted, there may be some misjudgements or less successful application. Sometimes the approach is to use a few simple techniques like a bit of filtering, and delay or big reverbs, without really considering how it fits into the movement and development of the musical ideas.

One of the common pitfalls of students choosing the video brief was lacking development in the piece overall. Whilst ambient layered pieces are suitable for the stimulus, there was a lot of scope for introducing variations, builds, drops and hit points within the cues, and the majority of students missed these opportunities.

In the other two briefs the stimulus itself encourages exploration of sound design, particularly with vocals, and there was a similar range from controlled, imaginative and successful work to more basic and simplistic techniques. Students should be encouraged to think about the delivery of the words if they are choosing the set text brief. A deadpan, news-reader type narration is hard to develop interesting musical ideas from. In a few cases students took the Mandela text and built it into songs or raps, re-arranging the words and repeating sections as appropriate, or even simply finding a narrator with an interesting voice and then chopping and manipulating the recorded audio. The Where Are You From? brief did encourage some entertaining and sometimes thoughtful sampling.

Administration, Equipment and Learning Spaces

Examiners are always thankful when centre submissions are well organised and all the correct items are present. There are generally much fewer issues than there have been in the past, and where the occasional inevitable issue needs to be resolved it is nearly always resolved quickly. Equipment provision in centres is clearly at a good level and suitable for the course in the vast majority of cases. It's not always clear if centres have a separate control room fro recording and for mixing. This is a very important resource, and whilst space is often at a premium it is a big benefit to the students to be able to run recording sessions and mixing sessions in a reasonably isolated and acoustically treated space.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:
http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx

Pearson Education Limited. Registered company number 872828
with its registered office at Edinburgh Gate, Harlow, Essex CM20 2JE